



## The Earth Liberation Front as Greek tragedy

A new independent movie, opening Friday in Seattle, tells the story of the Earth Liberation Front and the strange case of an activist named Daniel McGowan.

**By Pamela Biery**

**July 20, 2011.**

**The indie film** "If A Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front" explores a comparatively naïve time when passionate environmentalists were clashing with timber companies, big business, and law enforcement. The word "terrorism" had not yet been indelibly changed by 9/11.

The period from 1995 until early 2001 saw a relatively high level of Earth Liberation Front activity in the Pacific Northwest. "If A Tree Falls" focuses on this time and place with terse pacing, new footage, and rare insights. Part CSI thriller, part personal mythic journey, "If a Tree Falls" examines the radicalization of a single member with striking, newly accessed archival footage, and personal interviews. Filmed with constant movement and flow, this real-life crime drama ends with a question mark.

Director Marshall Curry takes the viewer down the complex path that pulled individuals into actions that were intended to protect the environment, but had unexpected outcomes. This film provides the previously unseen footage of Earth Liberation Front (ELF) efforts to work peacefully and the radical actions taken against these efforts by law enforcement, which in turn led ELF cell members to abandon hope of change through non-violence. In terms of storytelling, "If a Tree Falls" gives us a sense of a full book, with multiple chapters, rather than a few paragraphs taken out of context.

**Pulling headlines from the news** lets one skate across the surface of a smooth pond, but here, Director Curry shows the cracks in the ice and the destruction of more than property — hinting at the waste of young, idealistic lives caught in a web spun by lifelong petty criminals, impassioned beliefs, and a post 9-11 hunt, dubbed the "Green Scare." Earth Liberation Front's choices and context ran headlong into a changing post 9-11 psychology and enhanced terrorism sweep — a sort of double-whammy which left some in prison, others with fixed opinions, and still more wondering.

Curry encountered the story behind the film when federal agents stormed the domestic violence center his wife worked at in New York in 2005, arresting an employee, Daniel McGowan, who was then known as an ethical and conscientious worker, the son of a Rockaway Police officer, already holding a degree in business and in school studying to practice acupuncture.

Daniel McGowan was one of 13 people arrested by federal agents in a nationwide sweep of radical environmentalists involved with the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), a group the FBI has called America's "number one domestic terrorism threat." With these arrests, the government had cracked what was probably the largest ELF cell in America and brought down the group responsible for the very first ELF arsons in this country. Uncomfortable questions quickly come to the surface, as Curry tracks the remarkable true story of the rise and fall of Daniel McGowan's ELF cell.

ELF's actions at the University of Washington and WTO have recently been in the news. If you have ever scratched your head and wondered 'what were they thinking?' or been angered by these actions, see this film. Through back-story and interviews with Daniel McGowan, Curry personalizes events and creates context, providing surprises at every turn.

"If A Tree Falls" demonstrates the great vulnerability America has created for bright idealists, who can be turned away from potential legal recourse by heavy-handed law enforcement and become frustrated with the imbalance of corporate justice. The instructive voices filling this vacuum for McGowan appear highly suspect. In the film, McGowan asks, "I am not suggesting that the path of destruction is the right path, but when you are screaming at the top of your lungs and no one hears you, what are you supposed to do?" This film is an invitation to learn more, and whatever one's position, begs the question of how Americans may best support those bright enough to seek change, question authority, and advance our society.

**"If A Tree Falls" has elements of a Greek tragedy**, with a favored protagonist, fighting for right, guided wrongly, and cast away by the cause that inspired the very ordeal, but this is by hints and subtleties. Curry's film invites dialogue and conversation by pushing boundaries and destroying assumptions made by both activists and law enforcers through factual records and first-person accounts from many sources. Expect to sit on the edge of your seat and cover lots of ground in this 85-minute tightly edited, behind the scenes view of ELF in the Pacific Northwest.

Curry has a deft hand at exposing facts, while keeping an eye on the clock; his fine editing and open mind pay off in "If A Tree Falls." Curry's other films include the documentary, "Street Fight," the story of Cory Booker's first run for mayor of Newark, N.J. "Street Fight" was nominated for an Academy Award and an Emmy. His second effort, the feature documentary, "Racing Dreams," won numerous awards including the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival Award for Best Documentary. Just released, "If a Tree Falls" has already earned the 2011 Sundance Festival Documentary Editing Award.

When Curry was asked in a telephone interview what he hoped viewers would take away from his film, he said that he would wish it to be a cautionary tale for activists. And he said he hopes people will ask, "Do these tactics serve the goal?"

*The film opens Friday, July 22, at Landmark Theatres' Varsity Theatre, 4329 University Way NE. A film trailer is here.*

*Pamela Biery is a freelance writer and communications professional living in Seattle. Her work has appeared in regional and national publications. She maintains a website at [www.PamelaB.com](http://www.PamelaB.com).*

**View this story online at: <http://crosscut.com/2011/07/20/environment/21110/The-Earth-Liberation-Front-as-Greek-tragedy/>**

**© 2011 Crosscut Public Media. All rights reserved.**

Printed on August 02, 2011